

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1-6THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
1 May 1980

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Iran convinced US meant to topple regime

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Tehran, Iran

The verdict, among Iranian leaders, is virtually unanimous: President Carter's troops were out not only to free 53 American hostages but also to topple the Tehran government and sink the Islamic revolution.

Western Europe reportedly is trying to talk Mr. Carter out of any further military action. But one ominous result of the failed US rescue mission of April 25 has been to reinforce already rife "American conspiracy" theories here. That, in turn, makes a negotiated resolution of Iranian-United States differences even more complicated.

Indeed, primed by Iran's distinctly xenophobic brand of nationalism and the Islamic revolution's gusto for "martyrdom," the mounting distrust of US intentions is taking on all the appearances of a jihad, or Muslim holy war.

"Ours is a nation of blood, our philosophy is jihad," Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared hours after the failure of the US mission.

To most Americans, Iran's contention that the rescue operation's ultimate aim was to topple Ayatollah Khomeini will seem ridiculous, perhaps paranoid.

But Iranian officials point to "evidence" they say was culled from documents left behind when the mission was ditched in the eastern desert. The man sent to the scene by Ayatollah Khomeini to pore through the mission's remains told journalists that captured maps highlighted such landmarks as the Muslim holy city of Qom, the site of Tehran's Friday prayers, and the residence of the Ayatollah.

Western reporters were afforded a quick, cursory glance at some of the alleged documents. One was, indeed, a minutely accurate map of Tehran, with some areas marked in green; another appeared to be a huge, fold-out route map for the US operation.

But it was impossible to confirm the details cited by Iranian officials, much less their later charge that the Americans had actually planned to kidnap Ayatollah Khomeini.

Yet for many Iranians, that is beside the point. History haunts this

revolution, particularly the involvement of the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) 27 years ago in toppling Iran's Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq, who had nationalized oil and unsettled the West, and reinstating a briefly exiled Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi.

From the start of the hostage crisis last November, one major snag in finding a negotiated exit has been the conviction of Ayatollah Khomeini and numerous other Iranians that President Carter, in the words of one source close to the Ayatollah, "is out to try another 1953."

Even relative "moderates" such as President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr have long suspected US intentions. When President Carter was trying to work out a scheme for transferring control of the hostages from their militant student captors to the Iranian government in March, Mr. Bani-Sadr reportedly told one confidant:

"It is a trick. Carter wants me to go through with this arrangement so he can paint the government here as an international outlaw."

The deal fell through, regardless, when Ayatollah Khomeini and the militant embassy captors in effect passed a joint veto.

But Iran's President provides perhaps the best example of the redoubled suspicion of Washington among prominent Iranians since the hostage rescue attempt.

Speaking shortly afterward, Mr. Bani-Sadr charged that the Americans actually had been trying to "overthrow the [Iranian] central power, demolish the government's sovereignty, and prepare the ground for the emergence of a regime desirable for the US."

Virtually every Iranian official, from the Ayatollah down, has echoed these sentiments.

At the same time, virtually every instance of unrest in a revolution with more than its share of disorders has been blamed on the Americans for their alleged "fifth-columnists" or "lackeys" inside Iran.

Part of this, no doubt, is a matter of political convenience. Anti-Americanism is one possible means of unifying, however imperfectly, an increasingly disunited revolution.

But in the words of one European ambassador: "It would be a mistake to underestimate the depth and genuineness of Iranian suspicions toward the United States. These feelings are serious, and must be taken into account in any effort to reach a negotiated settlement over the hostages."

Even without accounting for Iranian suspicions, there are growing indications that President Carter's European allies will have a tough time working out a negotiated resolution before the Iranian-US crisis hardens prohibitively.

Leaders of the European Community (EC) nations, speaking in Luxembourg April 28, reaffirmed plans to impose economic sanctions unless Iran moved decisively toward resolving the hostage crisis by mid-May. The Europeans also suggested that a renewed United Nations initiative might be the best way to move things in that direction.

But on both fronts there are difficulties. And Ayatollah Muhammad Beheshti, leader of the hard-line clerical faction in the Revolutionary Council, on April 30 became the latest Iranian figure to suggest that a "spy trial" of the hostages, and ultimately of overall US policy, now is a much more likely possibility.

President Bani-Sadr, on a directive from Ayatollah Khomeini, has invited United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim to Tehran May 10. Yet the stated reason is not to restart moves to free the hostages, but to view signs of "American aggression against Iran." Cuban President Fidel Castro, as current head of the nonaligned nations, and Palestinian guerrilla leader Yasser Arafat are among other leaders invited.

Ayatollah Khomeini, in calling for the international conference, also added that he thought organizations like the United Nations were supporting Washington's "cannibalistic crimes."

It remained far from clear, European diplomats here commented, whether the invitation could be used to reintroduce UN mediators into the hostage equation.

The logic of the Europeans' May deadline, meanwhile, also seems in danger of being undermined. Ayatollah Khomeini has empowered an as-yet-un-elected parliament to decide what will happen to the hostages, and the Europeans had hoped that task would be under way by the middle of May.

But parliamentary elections, originally set for May 2, have been pushed back a week. Iran's deputy interior minister was quoted April 29 as saying the legislature would not even convene before the end of May.

Ayatollah Beheshti in his April 30 news conference suggested that a number of organizational tasks for the new parliament could further delay any decision on the American captives.